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THE WEBBS' CONSTITUTION FOR THE SOCIALIST COMMONWEALTH¹

If looked at from the standpoint of the ultimate goal, the Webbs' plan for a constitution for the socialist commonwealth of Great Britain, while economically sound, is politically and humanly impossible. If looked at from the standpoint of the immediate situation, it is a masterpiece of analysis, criticism, and construction.

The authors had before them the guild socialism of England, with its sisters and cousins, the soviets of Russia, the syndicalism of France, the independent socialists of Germany, and the Plumb plan of America. The genesis of this interesting family of reconstruction is the "self-governing workshop" of employees electing their foremen, superintendents, and board of directors, affiliated with other shops of the same industry and governed by a national board of representatives from the shops—in other words, government by producers. The Webbs proceed to extirpate this idea by history, logic, and argument *ad hominem*. They show that producers' coöperation has always failed. Even when it succeeds, the insiders close their doors to outsiders, and become "associations of small capitalists exploiting non-members at wages." To elect their own bosses is to make it impossible for said bosses to maintain discipline. And, *ad hominem*, would you have the officers of a trade union elected by the stenographers, clerks, and janitors whom they now employ or by the rank and file of the union? If so, that would be not democracy but the negation of democracy (pp. 158-160).

On the other hand democracies of consumers have wonderfully succeeded. The 1500 coöperative societies, with their wholesale agencies, with an annual turnover of £200,000,000, a banking turnover of £1,000,000,000, and a manufacturing output of £60,000,000, all governed by manual workers, are the present achievement of the twenty-eight Rochdale pioneers of 1844. Most significant of all, they succeed as great employers and farmers, manufacturing products, growing tea in Ceylon and wheat in Canada, operating steamships and warehouses, employing 200,000 wage-earners, and even taking over the bankrupt democracies of producers. Moreover this kind of democracy, unlike that of producers, "automatically remains always open to newcomers."

But these democracies of consumers are as "soulless" as capitalists. They know quantity, quality, and price, but not the human aspirations of their 200,000 employees (p. 23). Here is where the democracies of producers come in, and will be needed just as much in the socialist commonwealth as in the capitalist one. Their function consists in mutual

¹ Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *A Constitution for the Socialist Commonwealth of Great Britain*. (New York: Longmans, Green & Co. 1920. Pp. xviii, 364. \$4.25.)

insurance and in maintaining the standard rate, the normal day, and the conditions of employment through collective bargaining. Even in the socialist commonwealth, they must retain the right to strike, and will retain it if, according to the plan, the democracy of consumers is not allowed to have the use of the military as strike breakers (p. 141). But it is "highly improbable that matters would often come to such a pass," for a strike on a large scale is unlikely, if "once the distorting influence of profit is out of the way." Furthermore, in the socialist commonwealth the legitimate retort to "direct action" from one of the democracies of producers, such as a strike of the coal miners, is not to be the military, but "direct action" by the other democracies who "refuse to supply them with spirits, beer, picture-palaces, and tobacco" (p. 298). This looks mildly like the conforming process adopted in Lenin's dictatorship of the proletariat, made possible there, however, by an army of the proletariat.

The democracies of consumers, in the socialist commonwealth, will be of two kinds, as they now are of two kinds, voluntary and obligatory. The voluntary are the above-mentioned coöperative societies which purchase food, clothing, coal, etc., and build homes for members. The obligatory are the municipalities which provide water, gas, electricity, drainage, etc., and which already employ, in Great Britain, a million wage-earners (p. 11). Every person in the several local areas is a member of these obligatory democracies of consumers. A municipality is "not wholly autonomous, as the ultimate control is shared between the local electors resident within its area and the electorate of the nation as a whole." The national government places three limitations on the freedom of local government, the limitation of the several national minimums of schools, sanitation, relief of dependents and police force; a limitation of the purposes and powers for which they may incur expense; and a limitation in the interests of financial accuracy and solvency (p. 10).

Up to this point the great work which the Webbs have heretofore done in portraying the history and philosophy of unionism, of co-operation and of local government, is admirably summarized. But now we come to the ultimate goal.

This begins with the national government, and here is the democracy of citizen-consumers. Here the Webbs split from, and yet agree with, the guild socialists. If I understand the ultimate goal of the guild socialists, it is based on the hypothesis that sovereignty is not indivisible but is "plural." The so-called "state" is but one of the several forms in which people associate for common purposes—but it is not supreme over the other forms, it is only "first among equals." The most important of the other forms are the democracies of producers,

and, so, the coming parliament of England will be a producers' parliament equal in power but separate from the other existing parliament that now controls the army, navy, and police.

Here is the split and the agreement. While shattering the guild socialists' dream of a "self-governing workshop" with its producers' parliament, the Webbs' succumb to their dream of a plural sovereignty. Like the guildsmen, they would have two parliaments, a political parliament and a social parliament, each with its executive. But the social parliament would be a *consumers' parliament*, instead of a producers' parliament. On the political parliament they seem to agree. The political parliament would handle the army and navy, foreign affairs, colonies, criminals, and courts of justice. The social parliament would handle the "mental and physical environment of the present generation," and would provide for the future of the community. This would be done by the nationalization of all profit-making industries and services not municipalized by local authorities.

This social parliament would divide itself into committees, each in control but not in administration (p. 189) of its particular industry or service. The administration would be devolved on its executives and on that "civil service of exceptional capacity and integrity" which "it has been the supreme good fortune of Great Britain" to have developed "during the past century" (p. 67).

Most important of all, the social parliament would control prices, taxes, and wages—prices, because it operates the industries; taxes, because the political parliament must not be permitted to run off to militarism; wages, by collective bargaining with the producers' democracies. While the Webbs apparently agree with the guild socialists in the control of prices and taxes, they split on the control of wages.

The social parliament in both plans will control prices and taxes, and here they agree. The political parliament must come to the social parliament with a budget for the army, navy, police, and justice. The social parliament cannot amend the details of the budget, it can only fix the aggregate. There is, however, a suggestion that, "if after conference between the two assemblies, a total could not be agreed upon, the difference might be settled by the aggregate vote of the members of the two parliaments in joint session assembled" (p. 124).

On other points of conflict between the two national assemblies, the "law courts" would decide, and so, we find the latest socialism taking refuge in a supreme court of the United States. "As in the United States to-day," say the Webbs, "any enactment by either the political parliament or the social parliament which went beyond the powers entrusted to that assembly would, in effect, be declared unconstitutional" (p. 141).

The great advantage of the plural sovereignties of the Webbs and the guild socialists, over the unified sovereignty of Marxian socialism, realized in Russia, is the liberty of the individual and the private ownership of a large bulk of the property, such as homesteads, not used for profit. With a social parliament equal in power to a political parliament, and with trade unions and professional associations independent of either and sovereign in their own field with the right to strike, the individual is expected to slip through with a large amount of personal liberty and private property.

The guild socialists, however, have no place for collective bargaining, with its "plural sovereignty" of trade unions, unless the debates in a producers' parliament are fictitiously called collective bargaining. For, with them, it is the producers' representatives who are to be the social parliament which controls prices, wages, and taxes, hence without collective bargaining. Here they split. The Webbs would have collective bargaining with the labor unions, since it is the citizen-consumers only who are to be represented in their social parliament, and these would oppress the producers. Indeed, there is no place, say the Webbs, for a vocational, that is, producers' parliament, with sovereign powers, as the guildsmen propose (pp. 309-317). The Webbs concede that the several vocations can appropriately discuss and decide concerns peculiar to the vocation in question, but cannot, as producers, either separately or jointly, decide the concerns that are of common interest to the nation as a whole. The latter concerns belong to the citizen-consumers. Hence the need of collective bargaining to prevent these soulless consumers from exploiting the soulful producers.

Both the social parliament and the political parliament will be elected for fixed terms of years, by popular vote of citizen-consumers based on inhabitancy, and the Webbs have great faith in the British secret ballot, if once the electors are permitted to vote separately at different dates, on political and social issues, undisturbed by profits (pp. 102, 116, 120, 310).

It is embarrassing for socialists to be called upon to work out in detail their ultimate goal. They did not need to work it out when they were hopeless minorities. "Labor the producer of all wealth" and "dictatorship of the proletariat" were, at that time, good enough slogans for agitation. Likewise it must have been embarrassing to the Webbs, to whom the whole world of serious thinkers is deeply indebted for the solid work they have done in the history and philosophy of unionism, coöperation, and local government, to be called upon to make a guess at the ultimate goal. This book was called forth by the International Socialist Bureau in a request that each national body should submit a report on socialization and on the socialist constitu-

tion that shall be adopted by each nation when the socialists get control. The plan was submitted to the Fabian Society. It is an elaboration of the authoritative program of the British Labor Party published some time ago under the title *Labor and the New Social Order* and known to have been drawn up mainly by the Webbs, yet it is put forward as expressing only the Webbs' own opinions, and merely to start discussion (pp. v, vi). It does not pretend to be a scheme for any other country, for it has the great British virtue of building on Britain's own history, for Britain only. But it is called forth by the fact that socialists have come into power or near power and responsibility in Russia, Germany, France, Italy, without a program, and therefore they have split into groups running aimlessly into dictatorship of the proletariat at one extreme and subjection to capitalistic schemes at the other.

When an American remembers that in the British Isles are jammed together a population of more than 40,000,000, four fifths of them wage-earners, and all of rather homogeneous race, within an area no greater than the state of Wisconsin with its only two and one half million souls, half of them independent farmers' families and all recruited from a dozen nations or races, he may well hesitate to criticise a program designed only for the British Isles. Especially, he may not appreciate the consumers' coöperatives or the efficient civil service, of which we know mainly failures. He certainly will appreciate that "due process of law" which distinguishes the socialism of the Webbs, and indeed distinguishes that of the very first British socialist, William Thompson in 1824, from that of Karl Marx and Russia, in that it proposes to compensate both wage-earners and property-owners for the expropriation of their jobs and their property. The community will remember, the Webbs tell us, "that those on whom the Tower of Siloam fell were not greater sinners than other men. . . Accordingly, those British Socialists who have experience of administration, do not contemplate a method of expropriation essentially different from that which prevails today whenever a Local Authority takes over a local gas or water company, or acquires property for widening a street. Each owner should receive in compensation the fair market value of that of which he is compulsorily dispossessed, as between a willing buyer and a willing seller" (pp. 333, 334). The Webbs go further than this. "In the new social order aimed at by Socialists, as was proposed by John Stuart Mill three-quarters of a century ago, one of the first obligations to be recognized will be that of taking generously into consideration the claims of workers of every grade whose services are, in the public interest, superseded by new developments of technique" (p.

288). This due process of law means, of course, gradual socialization and not revolution.

We may also certainly appreciate the need of a separation of the political from the social constitution of government. Indeed the American states and nation have already gone very far in this separation, through strong appreciation of the inability of political legislatures to administer social and industrial affairs. Our congress and legislatures, in widely different degrees, have turned over the regulation or administration of schools, vocational education, railroads, public utilities, labor, health, insurance, prisons, hospitals, etc., to administrative boards and commissions, often independent of the legislatures and even elected separately by popular vote. The state of Wisconsin has at least forty of these specialized and quasi-independent social and industrial agencies. One can even imagine these regulative and administrative bodies coming together as a kind of "social parliament," and they are even doing so already through interdepartmental committees, and must necessarily come still closer together where their powers overlap, as in the case, for example, of boards regulating labor, health, education, insurance, and prices of public utility services. One can perceive also, that, with the progress of public ownership, the political government will not operate these utilities, as it does the post office, but will turn them over to administrative boards, as it does the schools, universities, prisons, and hospitals.

But to say that it will ever be possible to split sovereignty into "plural" sovereignties, each equal to the others, is to fly in the face of practical politics and also, we may be allowed to say, of human nature. That part of sovereignty which controls and monopolizes the use of violence will always be the sovereign. Every other so-called plural sovereignty will always be a *delegation* of power and not an *equal sharing* of power. To attempt, as is done by the Webbs and the guild socialists, to separate the assessment and collection of taxes from the use of violence could be dreamed of only by one who has been accustomed to see violence operate so smoothly under the control of the taxpayers, courts, and "political" parliaments that he imagines it is not there. Not "no taxation without representation," but "no violence without representation," has been the real struggle of those who have sought political power. Having this they have the power to fix taxes. The same will be far more the aim when, through public ownership, the "social" parliament proceeds to fix all prices, as well as taxes, and, in the last resort, to fix wages by compulsory arbitration, for these also must be backed by the power to call out the police and army in case of disobedience and revolt.

Even in the United States with its alleged divided sovereignty of the

federal government and the state governments, the states are really created by the federal government and granted power to use violence, which, in a real sense, is therefore delegated. Moreover, for the past sixty years, since the Civil War settled this question of plural sovereignty, the federal government has been resuming a large part of the powers of the states, and is authorized to resume all of them if necessary to preserve what it may deem to be a republican form of government.

To overlook this outcome is to overlook practical politics and its basis in human nature. Politicians may be expected to know where the ultimate decision resides. Capitalists and trade unionists may be expected to line up behind the politicians, and to reach out for control of that power of violence, and not reach for the mere agencies which exercise the shadow of power. If it turns out to be the social parliament of the Webbs where this power resides, no mere label over the doorway, "This is a Parliament of Citizen-Consumers—Producers not Admitted," will keep the trade unions or the capitalists from getting in. And I name the "capitalists," for although they are to be shut out when the goal is reached, they will have much to do with the gradual process of getting there. And even when we are there we are still to have the "vocational associations," and doubtless will have alliances of these associations, and therefore doubtless will have political parties of these alliances, each of them going after control of that ultimate smoothly regulated physical coercion that will fix taxes, prices, and wages. This means that probably the producers, the unions and the capitalists will not pay much attention to the "social parliament" or its collective bargaining, except by way of diverting attention, and will go after that "political parliament," as they now do, which controls the police, army, and navy.

But, however they get control of the real physical power of the nation or the state, they may well decide to delegate the *administration* of power to the social parliament, but never delegate the *policy* of determining what wages, prices, and taxes shall be. In which case we should have, exactly what we now have, legislatures or parliaments in control of physical power, but with a more or less elaborate set of delegated administrative boards, each busy with making the minor regulations that carry out the major policies of the political parliament. But the political parliament will be the sovereign one, and the sovereign one will be the one that controls the instruments of physical power. This would seem to be an elementary principle, and a starting point for all schemes of the ultimate goal, namely, that sovereignty is the monopoly of violence, else there is crime, anarchy, and civil war, and that this monopoly of violence is none other than a unified sov-

ereignty—a sovereignty that may delegate power to corporations, unions, coöperatives, and administrative boards, but never let these subsidiaries use violence in exercising their power.

With this outcome we need not question the soundness of the Webbs' economic program. It is sound enough, economically, whatever we may say politically, and eagerly to be obtained if possible, for it turns, as everybody knows respecting the programs of socialism, on balancing demand and supply, so as to avoid the great wastes and cycles of the competitive system. This is to be done by a grand super-trust, with its board of directors, the social parliament in this case, which is to combine the virtues of the single trust, multiplied by the balancing of all of the trusts in one supreme harmony. Everybody will be kept constantly employed, capitalists will not be permitted to construct factories and open up mines far in advance of demand, only to remain idle and lay off workers, through oversupply.

Likewise, when wages are fixed by collective bargaining it will be simple enough, through the accurate cost-keeping recommended by the Webbs, to put prices a little higher than costs, and thus to bring in whatever surplus is needed to build new capital out of the profits of the business. Thus there will be no trouble about borrowing and saving. The saving will be done, just as it is largely done now, merely by fixing prices higher than operating costs, and reinvesting the surplus by employing laborers on permanent construction, instead of paying the surplus out in dividends or by reducing prices or raising wages. And the social parliament will also provide for the future of the industries of the nation just as the capitalists now provide for the future of their business, not, however, by borrowing if their own profits are inadequate, but simply by transferring the surplus obtained in one industry to the capital account of another industry which is to be expanded.

This stabilizing and better proportioning of the factors of production is not only economically conceivable, but economically sound and much to be desired. The questions that arise are, Will the political parliament, controlling physical coercion and therefore becoming the object of struggle for power by sections of the country, by classes of producers and consumers, by militarists and pacifists, by alliances and counter-alliances, be able to do this stabilizing and proportioning when it fixes all prices and all wages as well as taxes? Will the distorting influence of a greatly augmented stake to be won by practical politics be less distorting than the influence of profits? Might not the desired stabilizing and better proportioning of factors be done measurably better if attention be not diverted towards the dubious goal of a super-trust and a plural sovereignty, but concentrated on a policy of

bringing pressure to bear on capitalists through unions and legislation, through taxation, compulsory unemployment insurance, the police power, and otherwise, thus inducing them to do it by their individual initiative, as has already been begun? Is it necessary to oust capitalism altogether, which is doing wonders through individual and corporate initiative, in order to oust the abuses of capitalism? The capitalist system is, indeed, in jeopardy on account of these miserable cycles of overwork and out-of-work, which reduce efficiency, impoverish labor, and arouse class struggle, and, if it cannot cure itself then something like government ownership may be preferable. However, the line of progress would seem to be, not towards a politically impossible goal on a misguided hypothesis of plural sovereignty and an inadequate appreciation of individual or corporate initiative, but along the line of a delegation of power to voluntary and obligatory agencies, regulating, as, is now done, the power of both unionism and capitalism, and even taking over private property as needed or where it proves itself incompetent, to be operated by administrative boards with delegated power. In any case the reliance must be, not on a plural sovereignty of equal sovereigns, but on that single sovereignty which is in position to lay down the rules of the game because it monopolizes the use of violence.

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